The ORIGINS and SOURCES of SHAKESPEARE'S HAMLET

Being An EXAMINATION of Earlier Versions of the STORY of the PLAY.

The story of Hamlet is part of Norse legend. The character of "Amlothi" appears in the Prose *Edda* of Snorri Sturluson, an early collection of Scandinavian histories. In the late twelfth century, a man named Saxo, called Grammaticus, compiled the history of the Danes (*Historiae Danicae*), whose third book tells the story of Amlethus (Amleth). The *Historiae Danicae* was first printed in 1514, and became a source for the subsequent *Histoires Tragiques* of François de Belleforest, which was published in Paris in 1576. It is possible that Shakespeare knew either or both of the sixteenth-century publications, or heard the popular story without having read either book.

By 1589, a play about Hamlet was sufficiently familiar to be satirized by Thomas Nashe in his Preface to Robert Greene's novel *Menaphon*. A passage in this Preface is frequently interpreted to refer to the popular dramatist Thomas Kyd, and therefore some critics conclude that Kyd is the author of this early Hamlet play. That might be the case, but even if the reference is to Kyd, it could be simply to the genre of revenge tragedy, of which Kyd's *Spanish Tragedy* is a foremost example.

The next known reference to a Hamlet play is in the diary of Philip Henslowe, who records that a play of Hamlet was performed on June 11, 1594 by a combined troupe of the Lord Admiral's and the Lord Chamberlain's players. The two companies acted together for a few days in the summer of that year, and as a member of the Lord Chamberlain's Men, Shakespeare might have been among them.

In 1596, in his book *Wit's Misery*, Thomas Lodge wrote about a pale "ghost which cried so miserably at the Theatre, like an oyster-wife, *Hamlet, revenge*." Although the often-quoted phrase never appears in Shakespeare's play as we have it, the cry "Hamlet, revenge" became a favorite slogan to refer to the blood-and-guts dramas of the time.

During that period, The Lord Chamberlain's company was playing at The Theatre, so the assumption among scholars is that a Hamlet play, sometimes called the *Ur-Hamlet*, was in their repertoire at the time. That play is lost. Although we have the contemporary account of its performance, the play was not printed, and there has been much conjecture as to the author. Some critics believe that Shakespeare wrote an earlier version of *Hamlet* before he wrote the one we know today; some critics are just as emphatic that there was no earlier version of the story by Shakespeare. What does seem probable is that there was an earlier Hamlet play on the English stage between 1589 and 1596, that it was popular enough to be referred to by Nashe and Lodge, and that some version of the story was known to the public before Shakespeare's play.

There is no way to know what might have been in the *Ur-Hamlet*, but we do have the earlier versions of Hamlet's tale to compare to Shakespeare's treatment of the story. The Prose *Edda* outlines the legend. The *Historiae Danicae* contains the story of how two brothers, Horwendil and Fengo, ruled Jutland under Roric, King of Denmark. Horwendil married

Gerutha, the daughter of Roric, and they had a son named Amleth. One of Horwendil' s heroic acts was to kill his rival, the King of Norway, in single combat. Fengo, jealous of his brother, kills Horwendil and marries Gerutha. Fearful for his own life, Amleth pretends to be mad. He fashions sharp sticks, which he says are for revenge on the killer of his father. Fengo takes the threat seriously, and tries to prove that Amleth is not really mad by sending a woman to seduce the Prince. Amleth is warned by his foster brother, and the woman, a companion from his youth, conspires with Amleth. A second attempt to trap Amleth results in the murder of a King' s counselor who hides in the Queen' s chamber to overhear Amleth talking with his mother. Amleth cuts up the body, and throws the pieces to the pigs. After this episode, Gerutha is Amleth' s ally.

Fengon' s next attempt to get rid of Amleth is by sending his nephew to England with sealed letters containing instructions for his death. But Amleth changes the letters so that his comrades are killed and he is married to the King of England' s daughter. Amleth returns home to appear at his own funeral ceremonies, celebrates with the Lords until they are drunk, and then sets the castle on fire, killing them. He goes to his uncle' s chamber, where he exchanges his sword for that of the sleeping Fengon. When Fengon wakes, Amleth cuts off his head. The next day, Amleth summons the people, explains the whole series of incidents, and is proclaimed King.

Belleforest' s adaptation of Saxo' s story is essentially the same with some stylistic and substantive changes. Both versions continue Hamlet' s tale beyond what Shakespeare uses for his play. How Shakespeare makes the story of Hamlet into one of the most popular, successful and enduring works of the English stage is the topic of many studies.

Hamlet seems to have been written by Shakespeare around 1600 or 1601, with possible additions and revisions thereafter. The play as "The Revenge of Hamlett, Prince of Denmarke, as yt was latelie Acted by the Lord Chamberleyne his serventes," was entered into the Stationer' s Register by James Roberts, a printer, on July 26, 1602. This was probably a "blocking entry," designed to establish a kind of copyright and protect the players from having the play printed. It was to the actors' advantage to keep the text from the public so long as a play was popular enough for their performances to draw crowds.

Despite the attempt to prevent it, a corrupt version of *Hamlet* was printed in an unauthorized edition in 1603. This First, or "bad," Quarto is considered by most scholars to be a pirated edition of the play. It is an unreliable copy that might have instigated the publication of a "corrected" copy the following year, for in 1604 a Second Quarto was published: "Newly imprinted and enlarged to almost as much / againe as it was, according to the true and perfect / Coppie." There are only two copies of the 1603 quarto known in existence today. There are seven known copies of the second quarto, three dated 1604, four dated 1605 (a later printing of the same text). A combination of the second Quarto and the printed version of the play in the First Folio (a collection of Shakespeare' s works edited by his fellow actors after his death, and printed in 1623) is the basis for most modern editions of the play.

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